

Book reviews

Aims and Motives in Clinical Medicine

By Brian P Bliss and Alan G Johnson. (Pp 181 £3.50) London: Pitman Medical 1975.

To many this will seem an attractive book. Purporting to be 'a practical approach to medical ethics' it offers guidance on abortion, experimentation, transplantation, euthanasia and other topics in language devoid of philosophical technicalities. Moreover it is written from within the medical ambience, both authors being consultant surgeons with academic appointments, and their informal, even 'chatty', style conveys the atmosphere of a relaxed conversation with colleagues.

The authors set out to show that moral decision making can be improved by a clarification of the aims which the action seeks to achieve. They also constantly stress the importance of motive in determining the moral quality of actions. In what they regard as a central chapter of the book (chapter 5), they supply the reader with a checklist to help him to analyse his own decisions.

Throughout the book, we are assured that an individual must make up his own mind about basic moral convictions, but it is surely a most insensitive reader who misses the authors' own preferences. In the first chapter, we learn that the Christian '... believes that there must be an external standard of reference and that these moral principles have been revealed by God in the form of commandments'. In the final chapter we find that it is *possible* to act morally without a religious faith, but not without some difficulty.

Regarded purely as an introduction to some current problems in medical ethics, this book could prove useful to doctors and others with little knowledge of the literature already available. The problems are presented in brief but balanced summaries and are well illustrated with case material. What is totally

lacking, however, is sustained discussion of the complex ethical issues implicit in the practical situations. The approach of the book is to break each problem up into 'aims', 'methods', and 'results' and to offer value judgments on each of these components. It is a style of argument reminiscent of a form of Roman Catholic moral theology, now largely discarded by the theologians themselves, in favour of other methods. Nowhere in this book do we find discussion of what 'right in principle' might mean, or of what difficulties are entailed by attempts to express moral claims in the form of principles. In a passing reference to the 'utilitarian' view, we are told that, unlike those who struggle with 'more basic moral principles', this view is held by people impatient to discuss results (page 66 and page 72). (I suppose we can be thankful for John Stuart Mill's sake that 'utilitarian' is in lower case and quotation marks.) No other ethical theories are referred to, far less discussed.

Perhaps it is unfair to point to these theoretical deficiencies. We are told plainly on the back cover that 'the book is *not* just another philosophical treatise around the subject of medical ethics'. This is undoubtedly true. One would not entrust surgery to a philosopher, and expecting philosophical skill from surgeons may be a less hazardous but equally inappropriate expectation. The book's value lies in the fact that it is an honest attempt to clarify the components of moral choices in medicine by men who have to make some of them.

A V CAMPBELL

Our Future Inheritance: Choice or Chance?

By Alun Jones and Walter F Bodmer. (Pp 141, paperback £1.25). Oxford: 1974.

Unlike most products of a committee, this little book¹ is coherent,

¹See also leading article on pp 56-58.

informative, and highly readable; it certainly deserves a wide audience. We are given an account of the scientific, social, ethical, and legal implications of some recent advances in genetics and biology by a working party which was an offshoot of the Science and Public Affairs Committee of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. The discussions are presented in such a way that they should be readily intelligible to the informed layman, and although some of the issues raised are still in the realms of science fiction, nevertheless one must applaud the British Association's return to the lists of morality and ethics.

The two authors of this book, a scientific journalist and a professor of genetics, have summarized the factual evidence given to the working party by a wide variety of acknowledged experts in the fields of human artificial insemination, *in-vitro* fertilization, genetic screening, selective abortion, organ transplantation, genetic engineering, and cloning. The views expressed by the working party presumably represent a consensus of the opinions of its members, people such as Professor C R Austin and Dr R G Edwards of the Physiological Laboratory, Cambridge; Dr John Maddox, formerly editor of *Nature*; Professor R G Dunstan, of the Faculty of Theology, King's College, London; Dr Anne McLaren, formerly of the Institute of Animal Genetics, Edinburgh; and Dr David Owen, MP, and Mrs Shirley Williams, MP.

The first topic to be discussed in depth is artificial insemination. Although there is an excellent account of the legal problems that surround the present practice of AID (artificial insemination by donor) in Britain, it is unfortunate that there is no discussion whatsoever on the central issue of the recruitment of donors. This is undoubtedly the stumbling block that has severely hindered the development of AID,